

House vote kills new minority district

ES - 1 2011

Change backed by governor's office

By Ed Anderson

Capital bureau

BATON ROUGE — The House late Monday adopted a change in the chamber's redistricting plan, reducing the number of minority districts from 30 to 29, the same number included when House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, introduced his bill a week ago.

With the reduction, there would still be two more minority districts than the 27 that now exist, but short of the 32 or more that members of the Legislative Black Caucus contend can be carved out of the 105 House seats. The minority district eliminated in the floor amendment approved Monday would have been added in the Shreveport area.

The amendment was offered by Rep. Alan Seabaugh, R-Shreveport, who took office last week. The change was backed by the governor's office.

Seabaugh and veteran Rep. Richard Burford, R-Stonewall, would have been thrown in the same district in the fall elections under the proposal that emerged from committee. Seabaugh's amendment passed 57-46.

Debate on more amendments — and a possible vote on House Bill 1 by Tucker — is expected when lawmakers reconvene at 10 a.m. today.

One of the amendments still to be consider, by Rep. Tony Ligi, R-Metairie, would take Rep. John LaBruzzo, R-Metairie, out of the same district as Rep. Nick Lorusso, R-New Orleans. It would extend LaBruzzo's district through Uptown New Orleans to the Audubon Park-University area, Ligi said. The proposal would instead pit Reps. Walt Leger III, and Helena Moreno, both New Orleans Democrats, in the same district.

Gov. Bobby Jindal's Chief of Staff Timmy Teepell and Executive Counsel Stephen Waguespack met with Republican House members early Monday to ask them to change the number of minority districts back to 29. Teepell said the administration also favors Ligi's amendment.

Jindal had indicated earlier that he would stay out of House politics and told legislators in his opening-day speech they should remain as bipartisan as possible.

Teepell said the administration decided to get involved in the House remapping Sunday night after hearing concerns from several Republican lawmakers and one African-American lawmaker, Rep. Barbara Norton, D-Shreveport.

"I am concerned about the whole makeup of the House," Teepell said. "By getting involved, if we can improve legislation, we will get involved." Teepell said that he was not only concerned about the possible loss — or no gains — in Republican seats, the administration was concerned about the loss of Norton's seat in the Shreveport area.

He agreed with Norton that the creation of the 30th district could lessen her chances of re-election and possibly

other minority incumbents in the Shreveport area.

Rep. Jane Smith, R-Bossier City, who chairs the Republican House delegation, said one of the topics of concern was the creation of the 30th minority district and how it will affect the chances of other African-Americans to get elected in Caddo Parish.

"We as Republicans must try to maintain our majority," she said.

Norton, an African-American whose district is now about 88 percent black, would see her minority population decrease to about 68 percent to help create a fourth African-American area in Caddo Parish. She also said it reduces the African-American population in other nearby districts.

"This cuts it and guts it," Norton said of the committee-approved changes to her district. "I don't have trouble with a minority district (being created) but I don't want you to cut me and gut me to get it."

Rep. John Bel Edwards, D-Amite, chairman of the Legislative Democratic Caucus, told reporters that the Jindal administration's stand on eliminating the 30th minority district "flies in the face ... of being nonpartisan." He said although Jindal has maintained publicly he wants the redistricting session to be bipartisan, "privately he is doing everything he can" to help Republicans.

"Republicans must hang together," Tucker told reporters.

During remarks on the House floor, Edwards, a lawyer, said that stripping the 30th minority district from Tucker's bill could cause the U.S. Justice Department to reject the entire House plan.

"There is nothing obscene about the district" and the way it is configured, Edwards said. "It is compact. This is no bizarre-shaped district. It is all there. ... The compelling legitimate reason to do this is to comply with the (federal) law."

Seabaugh said the district was approved 10 years ago as it is and it has not changed. He said the 30th minority seat upsets a balance of three white and three black seats in Shreveport to a 4-2 minority advantage in a city with a 52 percent white, 48 percent black population.

"Leave it exactly the way it is right now," said Seabaugh, also a lawyer. "There is no discriminatory intent" in not creating the new district.

When Monday's session ended, LaBruzzo and Lorusso were still in the same district and Reps. Wesley Bishop and Charmaine Marchand Stiaes, both D-New Orleans, were in the same 9th Ward district. Reps. Billy Chandler, R-Dry Prong, and Rick Nowlin, R-Natchitoches, were in the same district.

The House approved an amendment shifting Grand Isle back into the Lafourche Parish-based district of Rep. Jerry "Truck" Gisclair, D-Larose. The town had been in the district of Rep. Patrick Connick, R-Harvey, but historically had been linked with Lafourche.

Ed Anderson can be reached at eanderson@timespicayune.com or 225.342.5810.